

AT LEAST 8 DEAD AS PEAK ERUPTS; WORST BLAST YET: MT. ST. HELENS THROWS MUD AND COLUMN OF ASH

From the New York Times on May 19, 1980

VANCOUVER, Wash., May 18 – Mount St. Helens exploded at 8:39 A.M. today with a thud felt 100 miles away and with a drifting column of steam and pumice that turned day into night. At least eight people lost their lives fleeing flood waters, fires and mudslides that hit the Toutle River valley shortly after the volcano's eruption.

David Hubert, a spokesman for the Washington Department of Emergency Services, said that police officers working from helicopters had found some of the dead. "We have many overturned vehicles in the Toutle River valley," he said, "and our communication with the helicopters is so fragile that all I can tell you is that we have found five bodies." Two of them, found at a Weyerhaeuser Company logging camp near the mountain were flown to Kelso, Wash., by a helicopter of the Air Force reserve.

A helicopter pilot saw three persons in a pickup truck drown in the floodwaters near the town of Toutle. It was not known where officials had found the eighth body.

As hot ash flowed down the peak, mud and logs flowed down the river. "I could hear it crackling from my house," Tom Huntington said. At 9:30 A.M., he said, the river was "wall-to-wall logs."

Earlier Eruptions Dwarfed

The earlier ash and steam eruptions this year were dwarfed today, but it is not clear whether lava was being expelled. In the absence of a lava eruption, the major worries were drifting ash, which is hazardous to crops, water supplies and health; forest fires and flash floods resulting from melting glaciers.

Minutes before the top of the 9,677-foot peak explode with a shower of ash, two earthquakes registering about 5.0 on the Richter scale were recorded. Their impact was felt as far away as Port Angeles at the entrance to Puget Sound.

Within hours after the pillar of ash rose to a height measured by radar at 60,000 feet, wind had pushed it 160 miles east to Walla Walla, Wash., where automatic equipment turned on street lights as if dusk had come.

Elsewhere in Washington, the low visibility resulting from the snowstorm of gritty ash may have led to the death of a crop-dusting plane's pilot. His plane crashed into a power line near Teanaway, according to Kittitas County Sheriff Bob Barret.

The eruption came from the old summit crater and a vent on a north side of the peak. It made a roar "like a truck," according to Greg Meyer, who was fishing at Mosquito Lakes about 40 miles east of Mount St. Helens.

The black cloud, carried by the high-level winds that blow from west to east at this time of year, was carried over the lake with pumice falling from it, he said. His visibility was cut to between six and 10 feet. Mr. Meyer abandoned his fishing equipment and canoe.

Almost all residents of the sparsely settled area high on the mountain have been evacuated in recent weeks. About two thousand others from lower areas, such as the Toutle region, were leaving today.

Some other people were unaccounted for. One of these is Harry Truman, 84 years old, who has steadfastly refused to leave the collection of cabins that he rents to fishermen at Spirit Lake, Wash., in the most dangerous area.

The dense cloud of dust, ash and steam prevented any surface examination of the northeast shoulder, where a bulge has grown over the last several weeks at a rate that caused scientists to believe that a lava eruption was possible.

Scientists who have monitored steam from vents on the peak found no increase in sulfur dioxide, one measure of build-up that would lead to lava eruption. They said today that they could not confirm that any lava had appeared.

Inactive Since 1857

Mount St. Helens had been quiet from 1857 until earlier this year, when its slopes began to shake with localized earthquakes that geologists said indicated the inactive volcano's reservoir was filling with molten material.

On March 27, with an explosion, the peak began to spew steam and ash that drifted across into eastern Washington.

Today at a briefing at volcano watch headquarters here, Sheriff Les Nelson of Cowlitz County, Wash., said that "it looked as if the whole north side of the mountain blew away."

Traffic controllers closed airspace around the peak. Observed from a commercial flight as it landed in Portland three and a half hours after the eruption began, the column was dark and forbidding. Its interior writhed sinuously with the heat and when it reached about 15,000 feet, its top was whisked away in the wind.

Dan Miller, a geologist with the United States Geological Survey, said that at 12:17 P.M. today the color of the peak's discharge changed from dark gray to light gray, a change he thought might be significant.

The area around the mountain, which is in the Pacific Northwest's fir belt, the nation's major supply of soft wood, was hit with dozens of fires burning out of control, according to Jim Unterwegner, a spokesman for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

The blazes were caused, he said, by hot ash from the volcano and from the spectacular lightning storm that occurred when the mass of hot material was ejected into the air.

Governor Dixy Lee Ray of Washington has ordered the National Guard to be prepared to truck in water supplies, and residents are being told to drink water only from wells, won from open reservoirs.

At Randle, Wash., 25 miles northeast of the peak, three inches of fine ash had accumulated on the ground by midday, and cars were stalling because of ash drawn into their engines, Mr. Unterwegner said. This afternoon, the state police in Idaho reported up to half an inch of ash on the ground in the state's northern panhandle. By late evening, people as far away as Boise, in the southern part of Idaho, nearly 500 miles east of the volcano, were being warned to expect low visibility and to stay inside if they had respiratory problems.

Some roads were closed because of darkness in both states. The officials are advising people not to wash ashes off cars because it might release sulfuric acid and damage the finish.

Jack Follitt, 25 years old, said that he thought "this will be the end" when the mountain shook with the earthquake that preceded the eruption. "My whole life is tied up in those five acres," he said of his home near the Toutle River. "I don't know what I'll have when this is over."